

## CULTURE AND THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

by Virgil W. Topazio

Freud once remarked that the first requisite of civilization is justice; it is less debatable to contend that culture represents the corpus of human standards summarized as civilization. In our discussion of culture, we shall understandably be concerned with the humanistic as well as the sociological and anthropological concepts, i.e., the comprehensive esthetic, ethical, and literary considerations combined with the set of values more traditionally representing the sum of man's institutions and mores.

Admittedly, even savage tribes have their own particular culture and justice, but the more sophisticated eighteenth-century French society required an advanced system of justice more like the one propounded by the eminent eighteenth-century Italian philosopher and criminologist, Cesar Beccaria, in his 1764 *Treatise on Crimes and Punishments*.<sup>1</sup> The efficacy of any system of justice, however, depends upon the degree of individual and social conformity to established norms of behavior that distinguish between right and wrong, a distinction determined by reason and experience.

The eighteenth century, with its definite shift in emphasis from the divine to the secular, marked a point in the history of cultures when man for the first time became fully cognizant of his potential to effect a better life through human intercession. Thanks to the determined efforts of a relatively small group of dedicated *philosophes*, of whom the most persistent and effective was unquestionably Voltaire, that elusive vision had become not only attainable, but more imperative in view of the growing belief that a new humanism should supplant the previous reliance upon religious guidance and control in every sphere of human endeavor. The new humanism placed its faith in man's ability and right to exercise his own judgment in the choice and evaluation of his behavior.

The importance of the eighteenth-century French *philosophes*, then, was to shift the emphasis from the religious culture that had thoroughly dominated the Middle Ages and had remained powerfully pervasive throughout the seven-

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teenth century, to a secular culture in which the proper study of man became man himself, as Alexander Pope eloquently pointed out in his 1733 *Essay on Man*. Almost a millennium before, the great Latin poet, Terence, had aptly summarized the position of the *philosophes* with these words: *Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto*. How well they succeeded was summed up by Sebastien Mercier with these words: "If despotism has become civilized, if the sovereigns have begun to fear the voice of the nations, to respect that supreme tribunal, it is to the writer's pen that we owe this new and hitherto unknown restraint."<sup>2</sup>

The creative energies of man, liberated by the forces at work during the Renaissance, had forged the basis of a new culture that revised drastically the goals of civilization and the concept of man's destiny on earth. The Enlightenment, the name given this era by Immanuel Kant, held forth one vision—a more fulfilling and rewarding life, an essential cornerstone of which had to be freedom. To achieve this, society was held up as the appropriate idol for man, and within it each citizen became a lay priest. The *philosophes* turned to reason and experience to furnish the facts needed to destroy the prejudices responsible for the intolerance and injustice that had denied man a better life. By the second half of the eighteenth century, enough progress had been made to compel most ruling princes to realize that "some degree of literary sophistication, philosophical skepticism, and political liberalism was a *sine qua non* of elegance in Europe's capitals" and to strive consciously "to be seen as modern, enlightened, and civilized."<sup>3</sup>

It should be pointed out that the *philosophes*, with the possible exception of the abbé Condillac, were not systematic philosophers seeking to establish new philosophical doctrines. They were moral thinkers intent on preserving human dignity and human rights. Condillac, in his *Traité des sensations* of 1749, did refine and develop the sensationalist theories of John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* published in 1690. These two works became indispensable tools in undermining the hold exercised by the Church and State over the minds and bodies of the people. Once one accepted the Lockean theory that only that which could be verified by the senses deserved credibility, dogmas, revelation, and miracles lost their authority, as did the king himself, who had previously been sheltered by his quasi-divine status. In short, no truth henceforth retained its validity unless it could withstand the scrutiny of reason and scientific examination.

The list of *philosophes* who contributed to the Enlightenment is long indeed. For the purposes of this paper, we shall restrict ourselves to the four undisputed French literary giants of the eighteenth century: Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (however ironic or contradictory it may seem to include Rousseau among the *philosophes* in view of his unrelenting attacks upon everything the Enlightenment represented: a belief in

progress, education, the arts, science, and literature—the very hallmarks of civilization).

Though by comparison with the seventeenth, the eighteenth century experienced a much greater influence from abroad, especially from England and Germany, the French language and culture still dominated the western world. For example, Frederick II of Prussia preferred to speak French, and fancying himself a poet, he wrote poetry in French and sent it to Voltaire, widely accepted as the greatest living poet, for his criticism and evaluation. Catherine II of Russia not only appreciated the cultural superiority of France, she commissioned a “Plan for a University for the Government of Russia” from Diderot, whose library she had previously purchased. Later she bought the library and papers of Voltaire as well, and over a span of many years the Empress systematically acquired many French works of art that are now to be found in the famous Leningrad Collection.

In France one witnessed an insatiable desire for knowledge, not only on the part of the *philosophes*, who assumed that every field of knowledge and inquiry fell within their legitimate purview, but also among the salon habitués for whom dabbling in the sciences, belles lettres, and the arts helped to make one socially acceptable. (Parenthetically, I should add that the role of the women who ruled over the salons was particularly important. They often decided, for example, who would be elected to the French Academy as well as who would receive many other honors and positions.) This dilettantism, widespread also in England among the so-called bluestockings of whom there were many in London, was especially evident in the natural and life sciences. Even Louis XIV and Mme de Pompadour spent hours over their microscopes. This sort of affectation or obsession was sometimes carried to its extreme, as in the case of Mlle de Coigny, who reputedly kept a corpse in her coach so that she could pursue the fascinating study of anatomy during her long trips. Rousseau himself, in spite of his diatribes against the evils of culture, carried on experiments, and in fact once almost blinded himself while experimenting with ink.

Notwithstanding these examples of frivolous scientific curiosity, the sciences had long since become the subject of serious study, as evidenced in the previous century by the founding in 1660 of the Royal Society in England and in 1666 the Académie des Sciences in France. And in eighteenth-century France, keen interest in the sciences was manifest in the avocation, if not vocation, of many of its most distinguished writers. For example, Montesquieu, universally recognized as the greatest political thinker of the century, early in his career was immersed in the sciences and wrote on scientific subjects. Voltaire's interest in the sciences was unquestionably influenced by his mistress, Emilie du Châtelet. They set up an elaborate laboratory at Cirey, her château, where Voltaire spent almost sixteen years, during which time her husband was conveniently occupied elsewhere with either Venus or Mars.

Diderot's interest was revealed by his frequent attendance at the Sorbonne lectures on biology and chemistry, and also by his insistence on having his daughter, Angélique, attend anatomy classes, a most daring action for that time. The Baron d'Holbach should be mentioned in this regard because of his more than three hundred articles on scientific subjects that appeared in the *Encyclopédie*. And then, of course, there were the really serious researchers like Buffon, whose thirty-six volume *Histoire naturelle* was a veritable encyclopedia of sciences, Rouelle, a famous chemist, and Lavoisier, an even greater chemist, who is universally recognized as one of the creators of modern chemistry.

The stability of the seventeenth century, symbolized by a classical philosophy in literature, arts, and the autocratic political rule of Louis XIV, gave way in the eighteenth century to an intellectual and social ferment that characterized the Enlightenment as a turning point in our cultural history. The shift from mathematical sciences to natural and life sciences, and the adoption of a new method of inquiry, had resulted in the abandonment of innate, *a priori*, and deductive or rationalistic ideas and theories in favor of a new approach dictated by the Baconian inductive system that relied heavily on observation and experiment. Briefly, the incalculable contribution by eighteenth-century thinkers to the new culture and new humanism was boldly to extend the dominion of the scientific and empirical method of inquiry to include metaphysics, religion, and therefore ethics—in short, every field of human endeavor.

What transpired was a crisis of major proportions. Turbulence and confusion resulted, in part because of the unresolved controversy over whether humans alone possessed a moral sense of good and evil, in accordance with the seventeenth-century Cartesian dichotomy that distinguished between human and animal, body and soul. These deliberations increased the ever-widening chasm being created between man and God. And as the restraints and guidance previously supplied by religious, political, and metaphysical controls diminished, disorders and uncertainties increased within a society oriented toward man. In literature and art, the philosophical reintegration of man within the all-embracing fold of nature eventually led to a greater emphasis upon the individual with its concomitant defense, if not approval, of human emotions and passions. This is sometimes referred to in the eighteenth century as the rehabilitation of the passions, in opposition to the seventeenth-century view forcefully epitomized by Pascal's life-style, which included self-flagellation to punish the sinful flesh.

A new ethic was needed for the cultural climate being created by the *philosophes*. The goal of the Enlightenment, as expressed by the Baron d'Holbach in his *Système social* of 1773, was "to make people happy through virtue" (III, 164). The dilemma confronting the *philosophes*, however, was how to persuade the people to subordinate their self interest to the general interest; or as Rousseau posed this fundamental problem in his

*Contrat social*, how "each uniting with all will nevertheless obey only himself."<sup>4</sup> The general acceptance that culture, like virtue, can have meaning only within a social context, was the rationale for the eighteenth century's emphasis on *bienfaisance* (or emphasis on good deeds) as opposed to the seventeenth-century reliance upon *bienséance* (or emphasis on propriety and decorum).

In the formulation of the new social order and ethics that came to represent the Enlightenment, Montesquieu's *De l'Esprit des lois* of 1748 and Rousseau's *Du contrat social* of 1762 were very influential, especially in guiding the leaders of the French Revolution to proclaim the "Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme." Americans should remember that our Founding Fathers were profoundly influenced by these two works—more precisely by Montesquieu's practical insistence upon a separation of powers and his system of checks and balances, and by Rousseau's idealistic, if not always realistic, insistence upon the preservation of the individual's dignity and rights within the necessarily inevitable social and governmental structure.

The genius of Montesquieu was to work order out of the chaos of existing laws and different forms of government and to write his magnum opus in a clear and succinct style. He was one of the first to understand that social phenomena are subjected to two kinds of forces, physical and moral; and thus, in the opinion of many critics, he was proclaimed a precursor of modern sociology, which actually did not emerge as a discipline until the first half of the nineteenth century with Auguste Comte. Montesquieu's *De l'Esprit des lois* was the culmination of a lifetime of study and research, the completion of which was a race against total blindness. What emerged from this work was the recognition that legislation in general was not an abstract science but was bound to a great number of factors—historical, geographic, economic, and moral. As he explained in his Preface, "My principles are not drawn from my prejudices, rather they derive from the very nature of things."<sup>5</sup> This working principle enabled Montesquieu to reduce the complexity of laws to a more comprehensible and workable system stressing the relativity of laws.

In *De l'Esprit des lois* as well as in his *Lettres persanes* of 1721, Montesquieu, conservative nobleman and orthodox Catholic though he was, earned his credentials as a *philosophe* and humanist, for both works in different ways took up the cudgels against all the abuses of the day: religious intolerance, injustice, slavery, and despotism. To be sure, unlike Voltaire's, Montesquieu's temperament and background generally managed to keep him, like a Pirandellian mouthpiece character, cynically looking down from his detached or Olympian perch upon the human comedy or tragedy below. Anti-Voltaireans might judge Montesquieu's condemnations and attacks more efficacious, because they were invariably accompanied by reasonable remedies more likely to be accepted by both his fellow *philosophes* and the institutions under attack. Briefly, Montesquieu seemed to offer a social system that avoided

the Scylla of supernatural authoritarianism or anarchy and the Charybdis of *a priori* rationalism or adherence to reason unsupported by scientific examination. The deification of Reason during the Revolution was a tragic example of the dangers inherent in overemphasizing a virtue; the intransigent Robespierre, Danton, and Marat, alas, had not paid sufficient heed to the "Maxim" of La Rochefoucauld, in which he warned that virtue itself when pushed too far became a vice.

Whereas Montesquieu's *De l'Esprit des lois* was a work based on much precise research, Rousseau's *Contrat social* was an abstract political construct, a purely theoretical work. Nonetheless, it indicated a new direction toward a more human existence, in his attempt to blend the people and the government into one. There is no doubt that Rousseau's impassioned rhetoric and slogan-like statements, like "Man was born free and is everywhere in chains,"<sup>6</sup> had a greater impact on the revolutionaries than the more judicial presentation of Montesquieu, whom Rousseau by the way admired greatly. Perhaps the basic difference between their approaches is that for Montesquieu laws preceded liberty, that is, the liberty of the governed depended upon the particular formulation of laws, whereas for Rousseau liberty preceded laws. In Rousseau's eyes the General Will or *Volonté Générale*, which represents the expression of society's collective will as reflected through its legislation and constitution, could have meaning only if that General Will presupposed and accepted as inviolate the liberty of the individuals who made up the social unit.

In his *Contrat social*, Rousseau was subconsciously coming to grips with one of the fundamental dilemmas underlying eighteenth-century philosophical and ethical speculation. Nature and reason being the guideposts of eighteenth-century thought, their relationship to ethics and culture constituted one of the crucial problems. Nature or 'natural' was interpreted as that which existed prior to the development of reason, art, culture, and civilization. Natural man and Natural Law postulated a universal, physiological oneness or essence of man as opposed to the more ephemeral and artificial customs and positive laws spawned by civilization. More convinced than the *philosophes* that everything was good when it left the hands of God, Rousseau vehemently condemned society, culture, and their by-products such as literature, the arts, and the theatre for having 'denatured' man. Rousseau also condemned the *philosophes'* rehabilitation of the passions for having needlessly multiplied harmful desires and passions that had conspired to destroy the simple goodness of natural man.

Completely disillusioned by what society and culture had produced, Rousseau undertook, in his three major non-autobiographical works (*Emile*, *la Nouvelle Héloïse*, and the *Contrat social*), to present his ideal constructs of an individual, family, and society. And recognizing the inevitable march of society and the impossibility of returning to a happier and simpler way of life, he attempted in the *Contrat social* to establish a form of government that would



best preserve most of the human rights originally enjoyed by his natural man.

Like all the *philosophes*, Voltaire sought to reconcile his unswerving faith in society's capacity to further man's welfare with his concern to protect the individual from having his identity as a human being engulfed by that very society. The best long-term resolution of this dilemma in the opinion of our four *philosophes* was to be found in the development of an enlightened monarch. But in the meantime there were many problems that needed immediate attention, so Voltaire took the lead in battling the forces of evil, and he remained more "engagé" throughout his long lifetime than any other *philosophe*. Next to Rousseau's heretical attacks on culture and civilization, what Voltaire condemned most about Rousseau was precisely his lack of commitment to the philosophic cause. And his consternation and anger were understandable. Voltaire himself exemplified culture and classical erudition, and like Bertrand Russell, his twentieth-century disciple, would have preferred civilization had it become necessary to choose between it and democracy.

Such was Voltaire's fame as a poet and dramatist, that in the eyes of many contemporaries he rivaled Corneille and Racine. Nor should one overlook his important contribution to the development of modern historiography and the new prose genre he virtually created, of which the immortal *Candide* is the finest example. In his humanitarian battles he spared neither his precious time and resources nor his friends. It became his custom to end his innumerable letters (of which we at present have 21,221) with his familiar battle slogan, "Ecrasez l'infâme." He was so concerned with eradicating the evils in society that many critics unjustly proclaimed him the very Vitruvius of ruin. But Voltaire knew all too well that injustice, intolerance, and prejudice had to be eliminated before one could build anything new.

In any discussion of culture in the eighteenth century, the name of Diderot must be added to those of Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Rousseau. It was Diderot who masterminded the publication of the most important single undertaking of the century, the *Encyclopédie*, of which the seventeen volumes of text and five volumes of plates were published between 1751 and 1765. Diderot's persistence prevailed in bringing this work to its conclusion in spite of seemingly insurmountable obstacles like the defection of his co-editor D'Alembert in 1758 and a continual battle with censorship that eventually led to the suppression of the *Encyclopédie* by the Government in 1759. Nevertheless, Voltaire complained that concessions to censorship had deprived the work of its desired effectiveness and that the uneven quality of the numerous contributors had produced a work stylistically defective. These dissatisfactions no doubt made him more susceptible to the suggestion made to a dinner group by Frederick II one evening at Potsdam to undertake a philosophical dictionary. Frederick II may not have been serious in making his suggestion, but Voltaire reportedly seized upon the idea and proceeded to embark upon this project with his customary zeal. As a result, by 1764 he had singlehandedly

compiled his own *Dictionnaire philosophique*. And about a decade later, between 1772 and 1774, he had expanded this alphabetical format into the nine-volume *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*.

Impressive as the alphabetical works of Voltaire are, and some consider his *Dictionnaire philosophique* one of his greatest works, Diderot's *Encyclopédie* remains a more comprehensive reflection of the total culture and thought of the eighteenth century, if for no other reason than that it does represent the views of 178 contributors carefully selected by Diderot and D'Alembert for their particular expertise. It is a veritable compendium of knowledge, as well as a repository of philosophical thought and propaganda, the omnipresent censorship notwithstanding. However, an accurate assessment of Diderot's cultural contributions must also include the broad humanism revealed in his quasi-philosophical novels, plays, treatises, and the art criticism of his nine *Salons*, on the basis of which some critics mistakenly consider Diderot the forerunner of modern art criticism. Immeasurably influenced by the Earl of Shaftesbury's *Inquiry Concerning Virtue and Merit*, which he translated quite freely in 1745, Diderot possessed an optimistic view of human nature and a belief in human progress that were only slightly altered by the more realistic appraisal of man he adopted in later years.

When man constructs a world of culture, invariably its meaning derives from or depends upon values that are both natural and moral, objective and subjective, empirical and rational. Those values, perceived during the Enlightenment in terms of a nature-reason or nature-culture antithesis, presented a dilemma incapable of utopian solution. Lester Crocker posed the problem thus: "If Nature is good and culture is responsible for vice and crime, then shall we ask culture to repress nature? If man is evil by nature, shall we look for natural remedies?" That the *philosophes* sensed this ambivalence is manifest from the strong current of primitivism that pervades their works. On the whole, however, liberal *philosophes* like Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Diderot acknowledged the conflicts and unhappiness resulting from the tragic antinomies in human experience as an inevitable part of the human condition. They remained convinced, nonetheless, that the individual working within the social framework should continue to strive to effect those solutions most beneficial to society as a whole, while striving to preserve as much as possible the individual's rights and liberty. The role of the *philosophes* was that of the traditional humanists, i.e., to provide perspective, criticism, and clarification to human behavior, and thereby give meaning to human life.

Two centuries later, it is clear that the same social-political and nature-culture dilemmas continue to plague mankind. The failure on the part of society to resolve those dilemmas indirectly supports the position of the advocates of the Ancients in the famous controversy between the Ancients and the Moderns in the seventeenth century. They were ready to concede to the Moderns that the undeniable scientific and technological advances had



simplified if not resolved many problems, but in the realm of ethics and culture the Ancients argued improvement or progress was far less demonstrable. Indeed, they maintained, a good case could be made for the superiority of the Ancients. Though the respective positions of the Ancients and Moderns may be debatable, one fact appears to be irrefutable: the eighteenth century in general, with the French *philosophes* as its vanguard, provided the social and political impetus that was destined to alter the course of culture in western civilization.

Only time will tell, of course, whether the twentieth century will have succeeded in bringing to fruition the dreams and goals of those eighteenth-century French *philosophes* who pragmatically combined idealism and realism in their campaign to establish a cultural atmosphere more conducive to man's welfare.

### NOTES

This paper was originally delivered March 16, 1976, as one of a series of lectures for the Rice Alumni Institute.

1. Beccaria's *Treatise on Crimes and Punishments* was translated into French by the Abbé Morellet in 1766 and published with an anonymous commentary by Voltaire.

2. Sebastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris* (Amsterdam, 1781-1790), vol. IV, p. 160.

3. Carol Blum, *Diderot: The Virtue of a Philosopher* (New York: Viking, 1974), p. 33.

4. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du contrat social* in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade ed.), vol. III (1964), p. 360.

5. Montesquieu, "Préface" of *De l'Esprit des lois* in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade ed.), vol. II (1951), p. 229. The French reads: "Je n'ai point tiré mes principes de mes préjugés, mais de la nature des choses."

6. This is the first sentence of chapter I of *Du contrat social*. The French reads: "L'Homme est né libre, et par-tout il est dans les fers."

7. Lester Crocker, *Nature and Culture: Ethical Thought in the French Enlightenment* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1963), p. 507.